

VIRGINIA WOOLF

AND THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE



JUDITH ALLEN

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Acknowledgements

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For Stephen, Matthew, Lindsay, John, Daniel,
and, especially, Dashiell

Abbreviations

- AROO *A Room of One's Own* ([1929] 1957), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- AWD *A Writer's Diary* ([1953] 1973), ed. and intro. Leonard Woolf, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- BA *Between the Acts* ([1941] 1969), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- CDB *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (1950), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- CRI *The Common Reader: First Series* ([1925] 1984), ed. and intro. Andrew McNeillie, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- CRII *The Second Common Reader: Second Series* ([1932] 1986), ed. and intro. Andrew McNeillie, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- DI-V *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (1977–84), ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- DM *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* ([1942] 1970), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- EI-IV *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* (1986–), ed. Andrew McNeillie, 4 vols, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- GR *Granite and Rainbow* ([1958] 1975), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- JR *Jacob's Room* ([1922] 1992), ed. and intro. Sue Roe, London: Penguin
- LI-VI *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (1975–80), ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- M *The Moment and Other Essays* ([1947] 1974), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

- MD* *Mrs Dalloway* ([1925] 1953), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- MoB* *Moments of Being* (1976), ed. Jeanne Schulkind, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- ND* *Night and Day* ([1919] 1992), ed. and intro. Julia Briggs, London: Penguin
- O* *Orlando* ([1928] 1933), London: Hogarth
- P* *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years* (1977), ed. and intro. Mitchell A. Leaska, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- PA* *A Passionate Apprentice* (1990), ed. Mitchell A. Leaska, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- RN* *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks* (1983), ed. Brenda R. Silver, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- TG* *Three Guineas* ([1938] 1966), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & World
- TTL* *To the Lighthouse* ([1927] 1955), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace
- VO* *The Voyage Out* ([1915] 1948), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & World
- W* *The Waves* ([1931] 1959), New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & World

From Michel de Montaigne to the New Media: Reading Virginia Woolf in the Twenty-First Century

Que sais-je?¹

Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*
Virginia Woolf, 'Montaigne', *The Common Reader*

For language is by no means a perfect vehicle of meanings. Words, like currency, are turned over and over again, to evoke one set of images to-day, another tomorrow. There is no certainty whatever that the same word will call out exactly the same idea in the reader's mind as it did the reporter's.

Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*²

My first epigraph, 'Que sais-je?' ['What do I know?'] – used as Montaigne's 'motto' and significantly 'inscribed over a pair of scales' (II:12, 393) – was appropriated by Virginia Woolf as the last line of her essay, 'Montaigne' (*CRI* 68). Reading his *Essays* in English, and eventually in French, she deemed him 'the first of the moderns' in her 1905 essay, 'The Decay of Essay-Writing',³ and gave him a prominent placement as the first single-author essay in *The Common Reader* in 1925. Woolf's lifelong dialogue with Montaigne, and with the multitude of ancient voices that permeate his *Essays*, enabled her to infuse her own works with commentary about his writing, to compare his methods with those of other writers, and to use his ideas, and his methods, to inspire her future writings. Woolf's veneration of Montaigne prompted her to make three visits – with Leonard – to his Tower in the Dordogne region of France, the place of his creative efforts. Her absolute joy in these visits is evident in her postcards and letters to Vita Sackville-West, Ethel Smyth and Vanessa Bell. Inside the Tower, surrounded by the fifty-seven 'sentences' which Montaigne had painted on the rafters of his library ceiling, Virginia Woolf spoke of 'the very door, room, stairs, and a view precisely the same he saw' (*LIV* 318).⁴ The depth of her connection to the individual who created the essay – defined by its indefiniteness, resistant to categorisation or containment, while both expressing and enacting its quest for freedom – underscores his significance in Woolf's

life, in her writing practice and, most significantly, in this study. But this complex relationship surely needs further exploration, necessarily keeping in mind the 400 years of separation by language, gender, country and culture, and those contextual aspects that impinge upon our subjects in a multitude of ways but remain elusive. This inquiry will illuminate their shared interests in delineating the complexities of the reading process, the subversion of genre, hierarchies, binary oppositions and the referentiality of language, while privileging contingency, multiple voices, plural subjects, and process over product, and will ultimately show their readers the politics of their language.

Woolf's early attraction to Montaigne's 'essayistic' mode stems from her desire to tamper with genre, to undermine what had been, at the end of the nineteenth century, the 'conventional' novel. With *To the Lighthouse*, she wanted something different from a novel -perhaps 'Elegy?' (AWD 78); *The Waves* was to be 'a play-poem' (134); *The Years*, an 'Essay-novel' (183); and *Between the Acts*, a carnivalesque including 'dialogue: and poetry: and prose' (275). And, again subverting genre, *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933) were mock-biographies. But the 'essayistic', as created by Montaigne – a mode of writing that intersects with other marginalised forms such as diaries, letters, memoirs and autobiography – did not require transformation. Already 'other', hybrid, provisional and resistant to definition, the 'essayistic' both expresses and enacts the inextricable connection between its aesthetics and politics – and given its resistance to all constraints, authorities and totalising systems, it is forever seeking freedom.

Both Woolf and Montaigne – in their writing practice – seem to 'perform' the 'essayistic', a mode of expression that utilises extremely nuanced and complex narrative and rhetorical strategies while inviting the active participation of its readers; their goal is critical thinking. It is also abundantly evident that their writings specifically function – both explicitly and implicitly – to subvert any doctrines, treatises, or constraining and totalising systems. I find myself in agreement with W. Wolfgang Holdheim's assessment of the 'essayistic' project as one that 'opposes experimental soundings to dogmatic reductions and puts *essayistic theorising* in the place of reified theory' (Holdheim 30; emphasis added). For Claire De Obaldia, the 'essayistic' can be applied to 'novels' as well as other genres,⁵ and clearly accepts of the mystery and complexity of texts, selves and, most especially, the words from which they are constructed. Words, for Virginia Woolf, must be free of constraints, and in that freedom, as Graham Good points out, 'there is also a sense in the use of "*essayayer*," of risk and inconclusiveness, a feeling of venturing outside the paths of conventional methods' (Good 28–9).

This study will roam – in essayistic fashion – on some of those unconventional paths, from the late sixteenth-century Montaigne to the early twentieth-century Woolf, exploring their modes of cultural critique and the relevance of their writings for the twenty-first century. What becomes clear, in the exploration of their narrative and rhetorical strategies, is the current need for critical thinking and a healthy scepticism. The questions provoked by a close examination of their writings, of their theorising of reading and language, will serve to illuminate both the language of politics and the politics of language. Montaigne’s seminal question – ‘Que sais-je?’ – expressing the rampant scepticism of the late sixteenth century, reverberates today, in the first decade of the twenty-first, at a time when we are, quite ironically, inundated with ‘information’. At the same time, we are becoming more aware of ‘secrecy’ as the reigning force in governments around the world – both elected and non-elected – and of the fact that much-needed accountability is non-existent; we are also aware that calls for ‘transparency’ abound. Both words, ‘secrecy’ and ‘transparency’, although seemingly straightforward, are problematic, as Mark Danner points out in his article entitled, ‘US Torture: Voices from the Black Sites’ (*New York Review of Books*, 9 April 2009): ‘And yet, what is “secret” exactly? In our recent politics, “secret” has become an oddly complex word. From whom was “the secret bombing of Cambodia” secret? Not from the Cambodians, surely’ (69). Like so many of the words Woolf’s *Three Guineas* foregrounds as ‘used words’ (TG 101), words like ‘secrecy’ and ‘transparency’, ‘information’ and ‘journalism’, and others placed in quotation marks in this study will have to be defined in their immediate context. As Woolf’s narrator comments on words and their varied situations in her essay/broadcast ‘Craftsmanship’, we are reminded that ‘they [words] hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change’:

It is because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that. Thus they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as pikestaff to the next. (DM 206)

This commentary on language takes us to my second epigraph from Walter Lippmann’s landmark study, *Public Opinion* (1922), a text in the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Lippmann, who worked as a propagandist during World War I (WWI) and also as a White House advisor, learned how easy it was to manipulate ‘public opinion’ – yet another contested term that will play an important part in this study. In his Foreword to a recent edition of *Public Opinion*, Ronald Steel details

the experiences that moved Lippmann to believe that ‘distortion of information was inescapable’ (xii). Lippmann’s assertion was that ‘unlike the pollution of information, whose effects could be sanitized, distortion was part of the human mind – an essential part. This was because human beings are creatures not only of reason, but also of emotions, habits, and prejudices’ and that ‘how we categorize determines not only how, but also what we see’ (xii). Lippmann ‘went beyond [the] simple critique of press accuracy to pose a more fundamental problem: How could the public get the information it needed to make rational political judgments if it could not rely on the press?’ (xi). Virginia Woolf, dealing with the propaganda promulgated during WWI and Britain’s problematic media empire, the Northcliffe Press,⁶ was familiar with the manipulation of language to sell wars, to sell the ‘official story’. In *Three Guineas* (1938), her narrators critique those ‘prostituted fact-purveyors’, offering prescient advice that clearly resonates with our world today:

if you want to know any fact about politics, you must read at least three different newspapers, compare at least three different versions of the same fact, and come in the end to your own conclusion. . . . In other words, you have to strip each statement of its money motive, of its power motive, of its advertisement motive, of its publicity motive . . . before you make up your mind about which fact of politics to believe. (*TG* 95)⁷

Given that we also try to decide ‘which fact of politics to believe’, the need for critical thinking, for an awareness of how language is used by those in power to persuade, to gain market share, to forge ahead with agendas that enable them to create and/or ignore the people’s voices, is more important than ever – especially given the global economic crisis of 2008, the decision-making process for beginning the war in Iraq, and the realisation that we simply do not have enough ‘information’. Woolf’s narrator calls attention to the ‘facts of politics’, continues her interrogation of ‘facts’ and suggests that there are clearly ‘different versions of the same fact’ (*TG* 95).

The words ‘secrecy’ and ‘transparency’, along with ‘torture’, ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’, ‘drones’, ‘indefinite detention’ and ‘Abu Ghraib’ – to name just a few – are now part of the lexicon of our twenty-first-century lives, as the words ‘bomb’, ‘landmine’, ‘civilian’ and ‘photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses’ (*TG* 141) – all mentioned in the writings of Virginia Woolf – are still with us, still haunting our lives, with new additions and videos etched in our minds. It is difficult not to think of the words of lexicographer Eric Partridge: ‘War is a powerful excitant, perhaps the most rapidly effectual excitant, of language. It quickens and enlivens, enriches and invigorates language as much in

the twentieth century as exploration and travel used to do in the 16th-17th centuries.’⁸ Interestingly, the words he uses – ‘quicken’, ‘enlivens’, ‘enriches’ and ‘invigorates’ – all linked with life, emanate from that harbinger of torture and death, war. Geoffrey Hughes has assessed changes in the language of war over the centuries, and explores the new lexicon of war in the twenty-first century – with the familiar ‘weapons of mass destruction’ (WMD), ‘shock and awe’, and ‘mission accomplished’ – while older Orwellian euphemisms ensure that ‘the ministries of *war* have been restyled ministries of *defence*’ (Hughes 16). And with a nod to Hollywood movies, Chris Hedges, a former war correspondent for *The New York Times*, finds that the suicide bombers of 9/11 ‘learned that huge explosions and death above a city skyline are a peculiar and effective form of communication. They have mastered the language’ (Hedges 8). Hedges also points out that ‘the adoption of the cause means adoption of the language of the cause. When we speak within the confines of this language we give up our linguistic capacity to question and make moral choices’ (148).

Like war, nothing draws more attention to the manipulation of language than a lengthy political campaign. As the world watched and read the minute-by-minute coverage of Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency of the US, his words called forth strong emotional responses – especially his promises of ‘transparency’, frequently used in his speeches to undermine the Bush Administration’s culture of deception. That promised ‘transparency’, a word that has clearly been overused, is now proving increasingly opaque, as organisations such as Transparency International and the Sunlight Foundation escalate their investigations into government and corporate fraud – inextricably connected with one another – as well as war crimes, environmental and non-environmental disasters, warrantless wiretapping and other pressing matters.⁹ Encouraged by the beliefs, now widely held but certainly not new, across the political spectrum – that ‘information’ is likely to be ‘disinformation’, that material is being selectively withheld from the public – Montaigne’s question, ‘Que sais-je?’, now recontextualised and propelled by much anger, is centre-stage in many countries; this is evident from the 2009 Chilcot Inquiry¹⁰ into the UK’s decisions regarding the country’s involvement in the Iraq War. We are intermittently reminded that things have been concealed, that there is much we do not know, as we witness what surfaces from the past. Most recently, in August 2009, Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the ‘Pentagon Papers’ in 1971 by revealing classified US documents about the Vietnam War to *The New York Times* and other newspapers, began a project to reveal information that had been concealed from the world since 1945, regarding the horrific

bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is material from sixty-four years ago that is finally being revealed.¹¹ It is impossible to know what has been hidden from us – or what continues to be concealed, rebranded or euphemistically renamed, thus gaining public acceptance.

With so many countries struggling with ‘fundamentalisms’, human rights violations’, the stifling of dissent, government/corporate control of the media, and – in many instances – the electoral process, we also note the failure of that crucial tool of democracy, an independent press. Given the continual expansion of this situation, there is a need for scepticism, critical thinking and, ultimately, a greater understanding of the complexities of language. We currently live in a world of ‘spin’, ‘sound bites’ and ‘strategic leaks’ – in constant supply by governments, corporations, and designated ‘pundits’ spread across the political spectrum – all disseminated in real time by both the ‘mainstream media’ and the ‘new media’ outlets, with each contending for a specific audience. At the turn of the twentieth century and in its early years, Virginia Woolf had access to a multitude of newspapers and magazines, as well as radio, photography and cinema; today we add the burgeoning ‘new media’ of Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, text messages, YouTube and at least 133 million ‘blogs’¹² at the time of writing. Individuals around the world, those with the economic means to link up to the Internet, are faced with increasingly complex problems regarding issues of censorship and/or privacy, and most importantly, the extreme difficulty of trying to ascertain the sources of this ‘information’, the validity, the reliability, the inherent bias of what has now become an instantaneous onslaught of words, parts of words, photos and videos. The questions take on an Orwellian tone: Where does this ‘information’ originate? Who controls it? What has been left out? And with all that is available – across this broad political spectrum – how do we whittle down the possibilities, decide which blogs to read and choose what sources to place on our ‘home page’? Is our necessarily skewed selection beneficial? Do we read the ‘opposing voices’ with any degree of openness? And what about ‘citizen journalism’?¹³ Is everyone eligible? How do we interpret the Twitter communication that supposedly enabled the world to ‘know’ what was happening during the recent election protest in Iran on 12 June 2009 (*Time.com*, 12 June 2009)?

With the mainstream press so embedded in the corporations that own them, there are concerns that these media outlets will – or have already become – indistinguishable from the voices of their corporate owners. Revelations that the US Pentagon hired retired generals to appear on CNN and other mainstream news outlets to deliver military propaganda (*The New York Times*, 22 April 2008) provide reason for concern,¹⁴

as do the earlier apologies (buried in the back of the paper) from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* after they chose to echo the Bush Administration's 'talking points' and policies during the lead-up to the Iraq War, and the willingness of *The New York Times* to withhold significant news stories at the request of the Bush Administration¹⁵. The 'progressive' press – television shows like *GRITtv*, *Democracy Now* and *Bill Moyers' Journal* in the US, and journals such as *The Nation* and *Harper's Magazine*, as well as *Mother Jones*, *The New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*, to name but a few – along with many blogs and newsletters from the 'new media', have become our resident 'outsiders', the watchdogs of democracy, the voices of the voiceless; they are sometimes joined by Libertarians, and some from the right wing of American politics, along with a few courageous military figures who have resigned to protest against official policies.¹⁶

Unfortunately, most people get their news from 'sound bites' of the mainstream press, while, quite fortunately, a certain segment of the population supplements its 'news' with sources from around the world, and from the comedy programme, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The latter, although appearing on the *Comedy Central* network, owned by a major media corporation, *Viacom*, is known as a 'comedy' show; despite – or perhaps because of – this, it is able to address very significant issues, sometimes in a very serious way, without causing major marketing concerns. Perhaps this is the power of 'genre', the power of the label 'comedy', that denies its seriousness to a certain segment of the population, thus enabling this show to speak quite seriously to its own progressive audience. Many serious journalists in both the mainstream press and the new media make reference to the political opinions voiced by Jon Stewart, often questioning why such astute commentary comes to us via 'comedy'. Another show on *Comedy Central*, *The Colbert Report*, a mock 'conservative' news programme, is also responsible for bringing a segment called 'The Word' to its large audience; in its oblique way it serves to foreground the difficulties of our language in the context of its comedic framework. Bringing back the word 'truthiness' in 2005 – named 'Word of the Year' by the American Dialect Association in 2005 and by Merriam-Webster in 2006 – the show focuses its audience's attention on the varied concepts of 'truth', concepts that both Montaigne and Woolf viewed with increasing scepticism. The words 'truthy' and 'truthiness' appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* with a citation from 1824, with both referring to 'truthfulness'. This definition has now been transformed by its new satirical meaning: 'a "truth" that a person claims to know intuitively, *from the gut*, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination or facts' (Dick Meyer, 'The Truth

of Truthiness', CBS News, 14 December 2006).¹⁷ Montaigne, Bakhtin and Woolf would probably go with 'truthiness', given their resistance to dictionary definitions and their scepticism regarding 'truth'.

Attention to language is extremely important today, as our level of trust rapidly diminishes. When we read what is considered 'news', we should clearly be focused on the words that are chosen. Are we dealing with 'torture' or 'enhanced interrogation techniques'? Did the bombs kill 'civilians' and 'noncombatants', or are these people simply considered to be 'collateral damage'? Just how long will the 'indefinite detention' of detainees from Iraq, called for by the Obama Administration (*New York Times*, 21 May 2009), last – and whatever happened to 'due process'? In David Bromwich's excellent article, 'Euphemism and American Violence' (*New York Review of Books*, 3 April 2008), he reminds his readers of the famous sentence from Tacitus' *Agricola*:¹⁸ 'To robbery, butchery, and rapine, they give the lying name of "government"; they create a desolation and call it peace.' According to Bromwich: 'The frightening thing about such acts of renaming or *euphemism*, Tacitus implies, is their power to efface the memory of actual cruelties. Behind the façade of a history falsified by language, the painful particulars of war are lost' (Bromwich 28). Noting that 'one extreme of euphemism comes from naturalizing the cruelties of power, the opposite extreme arises from a nerve-deadening understatement' of George Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language':

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population or rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. (28; Bromwich's emphasis)

As we have been inundated with revelations about 'Black sites', 'extraordinary rendition', repeated videos of 'water-boarding', and photos from 'Abu Ghraib', there is a countermove, as Bromwich asserts, to change the language for the purpose of deception. For Bromwich, this kind of complacency is 'the correlative in moral psychology of euphemism in the realm of language' (30). Both *The New York Times* and National Public Radio (NPR) refused, until late in 2009, to use the word 'torture',¹⁹ finding 'enhanced interrogation techniques' quite satisfactory; the formation of NPR Check was a response to what many in the media considered the euphemising of 'torture'.

Given the difficulties of ascertaining what is happening today, how much has changed since Virginia Woolf was confronted with the propaganda of the Northcliffe Press? Will corporatism win out regarding its control of the dissemination of ‘information’, ‘packaging and selling candidates’, and the ‘creation of brands, amongst so many other controls’? Paraphrasing Virginia Woolf’s essay, ‘How Should One Read a Book?’, one might ask: How should one read any writing today, at the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century? The narrator’s concerns in Woolf’s essay revolve around her readers’ abilities to accept a few ideas and suggestions regarding reading, but most importantly, to make certain that these readers will ultimately have the power to resist authorities, and ‘not allow them to fetter that independence which is the most important quality that a reader can possess’ (*CRII* 258). These readers, we are told, may ‘attempt to make something as formed and controlled as a building; but words are more impalpable than bricks; reading is a longer and more complicated process than seeing’ (259). Virginia Woolf’s astute commentary on the impalpability of words, theorised in her essay, ‘Craftsmanship’, pervades the corpus of her writings and resoundingly asserts that ‘words do not live in dictionaries, they live in the mind’ (204, 205). These changeable ‘words’ resist being ‘stamped with one meaning, or confined to one attitude’ (206), for they – anthropomorphised here and in so many of Woolf’s texts – seek freedom. Always writing about writing, about language, Woolf’s varied texts – essays, novels, short stories, diaries, letters – express and enact her political vision, as her readers, unsettled and potentially transformed by their individual interactions with her complex narrative and rhetorical strategies, are positioned to revise their thinking, while inevitably co-creating the texts.

My overall goal for this study is to acknowledge the relevance of Virginia Woolf’s writing to our increasingly complex problems regarding the reception of language. Her theorisation of language, I will argue, is fully integrated into the critique offered to her readers; aware of the inadequacies of language and the complexities of the reading process, as well as the readers’ conscious and unconscious motivations, her narrator’s call for scepticism applies to the ‘facts’ themselves, as well as the modes disseminating these ‘facts’. Woolf prompts her readers to ask significant questions: who controls the language, what are the discernible motivations, and which government official, corporation, or media empire might ‘burke discussion of any undesirable subject’ (*TG* 162)?

My study will approach Virginia Woolf as a writer theorising language, one who looks back to Montaigne’s theorising of language, his extremely modern concepts of reading that language, while she

simultaneously interrogates the risks and dangers of reading, writing and being a theorist. I will, as Woolf – and M. M. Bakhtin – did, look back to Montaigne, focusing not only on what he says he is doing, but what he is actually doing; Woolf will require a similar approach. Considered ‘one of the earliest philosophic architects of modern liberal politics’ (Schaefer, David L. 76), Montaigne created a mode of writing that both expresses and enacts resistance and freedom. Implicitly subversive and defined by its indefiniteness, the essay – always hybrid and ‘other’ – displays a propensity for engagement; it also functions, according to Theodor Adorno, to ‘resist the idea of the master-work’ for ‘its totality . . . is that of non-totality’ (165). Woolf’s theorising of language comes out of a similar resistance to fixed categories, whether genres, gender, characters, or the very words that construct them. Although several critics have assessed the varied connections between Montaigne and Woolf (see Judith Allen, Juliet Dusinberre, Nicola Luckhurst and Dudley Marchi), my expanded examination of Woolf’s lifelong dialogue with his *Essays*, with close readings of essays by both Montaigne and Woolf, will serve to reveal Montaigne’s pervasive presence in her works.

The first of my three sections will explore Montaigne and Woolf as writers who self-consciously theorise reading and language. My first chapter will document, through reading notes, letters, diary entries, essays and her essay/novel, *The Pargiters*, Woolf’s lifelong relationship with Montaigne. In investigating the politics of the ‘essayistic’ mode of expression as it has been explored by Adorno, Lukács, De Obaldia, Pater, Friedrich, Cave, Deleuze and others, and close intertextual readings of essays by Montaigne and Woolf, interestingly intruded upon by Bakhtin, I hope to make Montaigne’s writings – not very often taught today – more familiar. Chapter 2 will examine Woolf’s essay/radio broadcast, ‘Craftsmanship’, which begins with an interrogation of its own title. After a close reading of Woolf’s most significant work about ‘words’, I will discuss the intricacies of choosing and reading ‘titles’, and examine the progression of ‘titles’ Woolf created for so many of her works.

The second section, ‘The Politics of Writing’, will investigate Woolf’s narrative and rhetorical strategies, showing how her use of single words, in varied forms and constantly recontextualised, functions metaphorically to make a political statement. In Chapter 3, I will focus, as Woolf does, on the word ‘but’, used in self-conscious fashion in *A Room of One’s Own*, as well as many other texts, to interrupt, to establish the contradictory aspects of differing voices, differing arguments, to hold several ideas in place while assessing their validity, or simply to resist

any final judgement. In Chapter 4, I utilise Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*, a study that examines the survival of the word 'wildness', in its dialectical relations to 'civilisation'; I re-read Woolf's many metaphorical references to the 'wild' through the lens of Montaigne's 'Of Cannibals', an essay well known to Woolf. I will also explore aspects of sixteenth-century colonialism as depicted in Montaigne's essay, 'Of Coaches', for what he voices resonates with Woolf's views on colonialism as they are expressed in *The Voyage Out*. Most importantly, I will explore Woolf's appropriation of 'wildness' for women, as it is expressed and enacted by her writing, and, most especially, by the 'wildness' that acts as a necessary mode of resistance to both the exclusionary and the coercive tactics of 'civilisation', as depicted and confronted in their lives.

The third section will focus on 'Dialogue and Dissent', with Chapter 5 examining the importance of dialogue, of all modes of 'conversation', as exemplified by Woolf's 'essayistic' practice and the very process of reading. That Virginia Woolf liked 'to be in the position of the one asked' (*DIV* 361) is significant here, as she does not want to dictate to her readers; in this context, I will show how, in setting up complex conversations, varied voices are heard and differing perspectives are provided. I will focus on the language and the interactions of 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid', a work written in 1940 and extremely relevant to our current world situation. This work will also provide an opportunity to talk about the language of war – in Woolf's time and our own – the 'subconscious Hitlerism' (*DM* 245) assessed by Woolf's narrator, and the relevance of the arguments expressed by this essay for the women of the twenty-first century, as it is read today in the context of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Gaza, Somalia, Congo, Indonesia, India and so many other war zones. It also calls forth a discussion about women's place at the various 'tables' in our world, about women's voices in times of war and potential acts of resistance.

Chapter 6 will explore patriotism and newspapers, in Woolf's time and our own. As we re-read Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* in 2009, permeated as it is by repeated references to 'patriotism', 'prostituted fact-purveyors' and 'photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses', we are deeply saddened by the familiarity of it all – and perhaps outraged that this text is so very relevant today. I will address that relevancy, and focus on what happens to those who dare to 'think against the current' – and more problematic, to 'speak against the current', an issue still problematic for women and all 'outsiders' today.

Viewing our modern world, as the first decade of the twenty-first century comes to a close, I will focus on the relevance of Woolf's

mode of writing, her ideas regarding language, and the importance of how we read that language. I will demonstrate how Woolf shows her readers the importance of critical thinking in a world where uncertainty reigns, where so-called democracies are insidiously dismantled, human rights are lost, coercive practices continue, dissent is silenced, and simply reading the 'words' placed before us has become a daunting task. Woolf's writings, and those of Montaigne before her, point to the need for critical thinking, for becoming active participants in accessing information. Her modes of expression work toward that result. In this exploration of the 'essayistic', with its focus on engagement, interaction and critique, we will not necessarily gain any definitive answers, but in its function as a mode of cultural critique, Woolf's mode of expression provides an opportunity for diverse voices to be heard. Given the explosion of 'new media', 'knowing' what is happening in our ever-shrinking world has become more complicated than ever. Yet the question with which I began should remain in our minds today: 'Que-sais-je?'

Notes

1. Michel de Montaigne (1965), 'Apology for Raymond Sebond', *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 393. Montaigne called what I have used as my epigraph his motto and had it made into a medal with a pair of scales beneath; on the other side it said in Greek: 'I abstain.' In Virginia Woolf's essay, 'Montaigne', his motto is written 'Que scais-je?' (CRI 68).
2. This is from Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), a work that was in the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Leonard had met him on a train and they discussed Freud. Lippmann's work as a propagandist during World War I, and in the US Government, influenced his provocative book.
3. Woolf refers to Montaigne as 'the first of the moderns' in her 1905 essay, 'The Decay of Essay-Writing'. This was her first publication in *The Guardian*, the journal of a religious organisation and not the newspaper, and is collected in (1986–) *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1, 24–7.
4. In Terence Cave's excellent article, 'Problems of Reading in the *Essais*', he speaks of Montaigne's love of quotation, and notes that in his *Essays* he has quotations from Greek, Latin, French and Italian, which seem like 'foreign bodies' in his text. There are more than 1,300 quotations in the *Essays*, which were composed between 1572 and 1590 in Montaigne's Tower in the Dordogne. Woolf visited with Leonard Woolf in 1931, 1937 and 1938, and has written about these trips in her letters and diaries. These visits will be discussed in Chapter 1.
5. See Claire De Obaldia (1995), *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay*, Oxford: Clarendon, 23–34.

6. The media empire of Woolf's day, the Northcliffe Press, was founded by Alfred Harmsworth in 1888, with magazines and then a chain of newspapers, and invented the modern British newspaper, founding the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, and buying *The Times*. Very knowledgeable about advertising, Harmsworth soon found himself a propagandist in later years. According to biographer, Paul Ferris, 'The Harmsworths caught and distilled into print the spirit of a guilt-free, imperialist Britain, loving every minute of its power' (4). Harmsworth became Lord Northcliffe, amongst his many titles.
7. I want to thank Pamela Caughie for reminding me of this wonderfully prescient passage from *Three Guineas*.
8. Attributed to British lexicographer, Eric Partridge (1894–1979).
9. Founded in 1993, www.transparency.org is a global society with a mission to fight corruption; www.sunlight.com was formed in 2006 and seeks to explore corruption in the US Congress. Other 'watchdog' groups, such as www.factcheck.org, www.fair.org and www.mediamatters.org/transparency, are simply a few examples of this fairly new enterprise.
10. The Chilcot Inquiry, announced in June 2009 by British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was to investigate the UK's role in the Iraq War. At first meant to be conducted via closed hearings, that decision was reversed. The results were to be announced by June 2010.
11. The break-in at Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office became part of Watergate, and the ensuing investigation eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.
12. According to Arianna Huffington of the blog, *Huffington Post*, there were 112 million blogs in 2008, this figure increasing substantially each year. Other sources cite higher numbers, such as *Technorati*, who claim the figure is 133 million and growing.
13. The motto, 'Every Citizen is a Reporter', was coined in 2000 by Oh Yeon Ho, for his South Korean site, <http://english.ohmynews.com/>. Jay Rosen, of the New York University School of Journalism, defines 'citizen journalism' thus: 'When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's *citizen journalism*' (PressThink). Jay Rosen chose 'PressThink' instead of 'MediaThink' for his blog because he wants to keep the word 'press' alive; he likes that one fights for 'freedom of the press'.
14. Retired generals, many with ties to the 'defence industry', were hired to present the Pentagon's 'talking points' to the public on CNN and other major mainstream and cable stations. This was a front-page story in *The New York Times* on 22 April 2008. These retired generals were gone from TV for several years but, as of December 2009, they apparently are back to push the Pentagon's agenda.
15. *New York Times* editor, Bill Keller, withheld important information at the behest of the Bush Administration, due to the story's potentially damaging effects just before the election. Keller withheld the story for fourteen months, although he first said it was one year. That additional time, and that information, might have made a difference to the voting public and potentially a difference in the election results. *The New York Times* had made this mistake before, when it became the voice of the government

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